

**Clear a Place for Good:**  
**New Poems 2006-2012**

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**By**

**Hans Ostrom**

**Congruent Angle Press** 

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**First edition.**

Many of the poems in this book appeared previously on the blog, *Poet's Musings* (<http://poetsmusings-muser.blogspot.com/>).

I recorded several for the Youtube channel, *langstonify*. *Black Ice*, *KONCH*, and *Writing on the Edge* are among the magazines in which some of these poems were previously published.

Thanks to the editors.

***For Jackie and Spencer***

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# Mere Sympathy

I'm feeling sorry for yourself.  
I bring some empathy to your shelf

of discomfort. It's such a small  
gift, sitting there against the wall.

I wonder if it does you any good.  
Guilt gets me thinking that I should

convert it to fuel which would power me  
to cook, transport, listen; to see

to something that might lessen pain;  
to soothe, repair, or entertain:

something, anything, specific for you,  
that is, as opposed to

this general sympathetic feeling,  
which hangs above us like a ceiling.



# Transaction

Although we've never met  
and odds are never will, we  
virtually converge here on line 3.  
I left imagery home  
because I wanted to meet you  
unspecifically as I write and you  
read this. I figured you wouldn't  
want to be imagined, for you  
already exist. You are who

you are, not what anyone  
says you're like: oh, if that  
were only true. Similitude  
is difference with a mask on.  
What happens next is that  
you think what you will  
inside your life, mind, body,  
moment. You are the only

you you'll ever be, a verifiable  
rarity. It is good to meet you  
here without having to know you,  
and there's a good chance you may  
feel the same. Your reading this  
transactional poem is what the poem  
will be. You complete it by being there

and here. Reading, you finish the poem  
I'm about to finish—none too soon.

In poetry, this qualifies as business  
transacted. It's been a pleasure doing  
language with you.



# Crushing Fate

“People who believe that they are strong-willed and masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception.”

— James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

Once someone advised me to run to my fate and crush it in my arms. He may have been confused about what fate is, who's the crusher, and who's

the crushee. Anyway, he confused me, so I crushed him in my arms. I said, “I'm practicing.” He found my behavior unpleasant, the bear-hug inappropriate.

As fate had it, we didn't become friends. —Even if I were to run to my fate, odds are I'd take off in a wrong direction. Anyway, I decided I shouldn't go around

pretending it's possible to crush fate with my arms or with rented fate-crushing equipment. Some days, I have trouble just making it to work on time. I'm

in no position to fantasize about crushing fate—or to give fate-related advice. If your situation's different, then I say this: more fate-crushing power to you. If you've located your fate and are running toward it now, I give you no advice. I wish you good speed, God's luck, and above all, strong arms.



# Modernist Shame

A student asks some simple questions

of Modernists, of canonical tycoons  
such as Eliot and Pound, Rexroth,  
William Carlos Williams,  
Amy Lowell, and Wallace Stevens:

Why didn't you write about Jim Crow?  
Why didn't you include images of lynching  
in your Images? Why didn't your art  
confront the core savagery of your  
American civilization? Your

"achievements," as my professors  
call them, are as nothing in the face  
of what you chose to ignore, therefore  
support. *Dare to eat a peach? Crowds  
on London Bridge? Much depends on  
a wheel barrow?* Much depended,  
literally, from Southern trees. Brown fog  
of London is nothing compared to  
stench of a burned body.  
You can shove your peach.

A goddamned jar in Tennessee? Are you  
Fucking kidding me, Mr. Stevens? And  
I read that letter, the student says,  
in which you wrote, "coons in  
Ethiopia." You, you Modernists  
your work lards anthologies I'm  
asked to buy. You didn't see  
them as people, did you? You  
didn't see their catastrophe as  
your catastrophe.



# Nostalgia for Nothing

The things I don't remember  
about childhood are ones  
I miss the most: nights I

slipped quickly into untroubled  
sleep, pine-boughed days through  
which I tumbled and pretended—  
I'm just guessing here. How exotic

the town of Childhood seems.  
To think: I once lived there, or so  
I tell me. Childhood's a village  
with its own sun and moon,

a silver silo full of languid days,  
and a golden clock-tower. It is  
a place filled with people  
who passed on from here,  
and what I don't remember  
I've grown fond of.



# Labor Breaks

Labor breaks you. When you're young, you roll through work, your muscles and bones handling any kind of shit labor throws your way. Work, though, stays young forever while you age.

It laughs with you when you're young, sure. It hits the bars and runs around town watching you go after what you think you want. It gets you up in the morning after nearly no sleep—no problem, you're young.

Then one day you're not young and labor hasn't aged a night. It grins and shrugs as if to say, "Nothing personal," and it starts to hit you with the tools of your trade, and you know this then: the work you do will break you.





# Only Dreaming

In this wet city under gray today,  
you'll sense how hard and wearily  
so many people work. Could be  
you'll grieve for grinding toil  
demanded and surrendered. You  
might think about how the nation  
is always and forever at war,  
about all that killing and trauma.  
Or maybe you won't have time to  
feel much because you're working.

Later you'll get across the city  
somehow as gray becomes night.  
Inside where you live, you'll note  
again how much you and your clothes  
smell of the work you do. Now other  
tasks await: to cook, to listen,  
to worry, to count, to try to rest.  
Only dreaming will seem effortless,  
but that's dreaming, which is nothing.



# Democracy Today

A politician's head swelled  
and burst out of a televising screen,  
crashing onto the floor of my room,  
rolling to my feet, where it lay,  
face up, a grin glued on like a photo  
of a keyboard, eyes fixed wide open,  
genderless features painted  
with studio-makeup, hair  
formed like fine-spun fiberglass,  
forehead shining like porcelain.

I howled, jumped up, ran  
out the door into the street,  
where everyone wore masks  
that looked like the face on  
the floor of the room I'd fled.  
"We're all going to vote!" the  
masked crowd cried.  
"You will join us!"



# Light Verse

So is light particle or wave  
or both or neither? I guess  
it's principally indeterminate.  
Anyway, I read about this  
topic a few times using my  
bedside light, the bulb lurking  
behind a translucent shade  
like the moon behind a pale  
patina of clouds. It took a while,  
but the sun produced Einstein,  
for example, and like almost every  
other creature, he got thirsty  
after walking in sunshine . . . .  
Light's the big mystery which teases  
its challengers by illuminating  
itself with itself, just as God  
gave God an order (*"Let there  
be Be, when You have a minute"*)  
and followed it to a T . . . If the way,  
whatever that is, isn't the truth,  
then it will have to do, and it's  
a lot easier to find by light—or by touch,

which shines waves and particles on  
our brains, too. . . . We say "the power's  
out" when we lose our lights, and,  
brothers and sisters, that's the truth.  
Light's a something from a nothing,  
*fiat's* luxury loping out of *nihilo*.



# Of Photosynthesis

Wherever you enter the story,  
the story amazes: Single cell  
meets ball of fire; epics of  
juiced up vegetation ensue—algae,  
sequoia, peat, fig, fern, and cacti.

Human history's an offshoot  
of photosynthesis, a cud  
chewed by divine bovinity  
in its green time. When we

entered the story, we cast our  
shadows, inserted our names for  
plants and stuff, studied and  
disrupted processes. Then we grabbed  
a green salad for lunch, so busy.

Let scythe or mower,  
chainsaw, tiller, test-tube, or gene-  
splicer sit for an hour—if  
the boss will let you take a break.  
Let's lie in wonder under photosynthetic  
boughs, yawn our wows amidst  
leaf-dappled mottling of light,  
and graze on amazement, taking it in.



# Human in an Airport

To be human is to sit cross-legged  
on a plastic chair at an airport-gate;  
to know different meanings  
of *gate*; to wear a dark woolen  
coat; to wear cotton jeans that owe  
their etymology to Genoa; to have had  
some of your head's hair tinted yellow  
chemically; to wear metal ear-rings;  
to wear a diamond-barnacled band  
on one finger; to read with great rational,  
passionate concentration a book entitled  
*World War IV*; to be one pixel on the screens  
of international corporations; and  
to mark passages with translucent,  
yellow, watery ink as if you  
might be personally involved in this  
or that denouement of history.  
And to sneeze.



# Chocolate

1

After the moon has set but before sunrise,  
sweet breezes issue from dark brown corridors  
of a warm, fronded forest. This is the hour of  
chocolate, when the mind is weary merely  
of thinking and wants to dance with ancient  
instincts, to self-induce a swoon by  
languishing in lore from foreign precincts.

2

Inside cacao beans lies a secret  
that survives translations of growth  
and harvest, compost, roast and grind,  
concoction and confectionery concatenation.  
After tasting chocolate, tongues transmit  
the news by nerve-line, enzyme,  
and bloodstream to mahogany-lined private  
clubs in the brain. There receptors  
luxuriate on divans and thrill  
at the arrival of tropical gossip.  
After the messages from chocolate  
arrive, brown damask draperies vibrate,  
and pleased devotees purr pleasurably.

3

My darling, I wouldn't choose  
between chocolates and flowers,  
so I brought both. Let me put  
the latter in a vase as you open  
and taste the former. Yes, I agree:

chocolate is *film noir* watched  
by taste buds in the mouth's  
art-house theater. Barbarously

suave, chocolate is an unabashedly  
debauched foodstuff--cad and coquette  
of cacao. Darling, you're making  
those noises you make when you eat  
chocolate--the secret language of  
satisfaction, the patter of pleasure,  
your mumbled homage to this,  
the moment of chocolate.





# Message From A Bookmark

If I am in your book, then thanks. Between  
The pages, most of me's kept warm. The part  
Of me revealed greets you: Where have you been?  
This book and I perform our silent art.

# Sexual Orientation

First of all, what an unusual term. Second: during sex, which parts of the body ought to angle East? Third, if there were a formal intro to the subject, an orientation-workshop, what society could agree about who should lead and take the course and what topics would be covered and uncovered? Fourth, people aren't ships or compasses. They're people, and desire is a kind of tautology, a self-evident definition, a personal concert of emotional music. Fifth, the sun seems to rise, people have sex, the sun seems to set, people have sex, and thus has it been so since so long ago, it seems like forever. Therefore and sixth, is it past time to love and let love, to realize adults young, old, and middling will find their adult landscapes of desire using maps that make the most sense to them and sensing direction from most idiosyncratic magnets indeed?



# When the Tongue

When the tongue  
touches the perfect  
place linguistically  
or physically:  
an ecstasy,  
most certainly.



# The Cunnilingus Poem

1887 L. C. SMITHERS tr. Forberg's Man.Class. Erotology v. 122 A man who is in the habit of putting out his tongue for the obscene act of cunnilingus. 1897 H. Ellis Stud. Psychol. Sex. I. iv. 98 The extreme gratification is cunnilingus,..sometimes called sapphism.

--*Oxford Dictionary of the English Language*, online

The gratification can be extreme. That's true.  
As I look at this poem, I'm feeling good  
about it, but we both know that  
the poem's language—yes, that's right,  
its tongue—oughtn't to degrade, devalue, pornographize,  
evade, or abuse its subject.  
That's been done. The poem has opened,

chooses telling Showing happens, too.  
The poem does not advise discretion.  
It decides to locate itself respectfully where  
it believes it's been invited. It chooses to be human and  
hopes you'll understand. Now it proceeds  
beyond the play of preliminaries.

Her apartment was in a cheap, two-story  
stucco heap—palatial compared to my place.

We lay on her bed in a close, hot room: Spring. California's Central Valley, deep between Coast Range and Sierra Nevada, had already opened up. She kept her window open. She lay back. The pillow-cases were bright red. She relaxed. She opened her legs. I went down on her eagerly—I might say earnestly. Great erotic generosity inspired me, or so I chose to believe about myself.

*Wait.* There's no rush. We have time to instruct anatomy, biology, and pornography to go away, to leave us alone. Believe it or not, this poem  
likes its privacy.

Hot, stuffy, small, and cheap, the room transformed itself. She and I—well, we took our time. There was no rush. Our time. Her room. The heat. I took her own sweet time and gave some of it back to her.

It was sex. Obviously. We devoured a ripe, wet, hot interval of *life*. That's all and not a little bit. When she orgasmed (what a mash of syllables), she seemed to have nothing to do with the pseudo-scientific infinitive, *to orgasm*. She screamed. That happens to be right. Screamed. Yelled and shouted, too. It was louder for being privately public. "*Ecstasy*"? I don't know:

That word makes me nervous. It belongs to romance novels and a drug. There's no rush to use it. Anyway, her sounds were so loud they startled me, and I lost my place. I smiled while I was turning *to cunniling* into a conjugated, tense present. There was no rush.

I found my place again, went back to  
work. Play. It was sex, not poetry.

So far so good? I raised my head  
from loving work. It is,  
can be, good work,—  
cunnilingus. It shouldn't be labor  
but can be more than play. . . . I  
raised my head to listen to her and to  
watch the rest of her body and her face

and take in the holy scene of the room. Is  
*holy* too much? Absolutely, so let's leave  
it, posted on the stucco heap  
like a notice from a landlord. I offered  
her a pillow with which to muffle the *aria*,  
if she so chose. She chose not so.  
Well played! I heard people giggling outside  
in California, on the black asphalt of an apartment-  
complex's baked parking lot, no rush of breeze out there. I  
smiled, and I

went down again into what had become  
for her a rich source of satisfaction, a fabled California  
mine, a vein of golden pleasure,  
a rush. I'd become a famously employed miner, producing  
lavish treasure with simple tools,  
tongue and mouth and lips. I exhibited care  
and the will to give my head. Such a primitive,  
post-modern afternoon it was, whatever  
that means. It wasn't history,  
but it was the best we two could do.

She was the only person she'd ever be.  
She wanted to be satisfied on a  
rickety bed in a blazing, stucco apartment.

I knew her, and I showed up. I  
gave her what she invited me to give.  
It was basic and civilized, polite,  
profane, sacred, and plain. It tasted  
and smelled the way it ought to. She became

immortally satisfied for an interval  
of afternoon. I swear I still heard  
people laughing at sex-sounds coming,  
so to shout, from her open window. I  
worked at loving, making a delivery, freighting freedom  
and joy to the realm  
of her body. That's an overstatement.

I know the names of body-parts,  
and so do you. This isn't about that,  
but please see references to tongue, lips,  
mouth, legs, and head above. The window,  
her legs, my mouth, our lives were open.

You can't rush these things, but it  
ended. I was a sweating, naked man  
with a sense of charity, accomplishment,  
and gratitude. And it was fun.  
She was a contented naked woman,  
so I didn't say anything, and I didn't  
want anything.

There's never been a rush to remember,  
and it's customary to keep such things  
private unless your profession is  
pornography or politics. Oh, well,  
this is a poem, and poems get interested  
in this kind of thing. You know how it is.

Writing this, I feel good about it.  
I smile and pay homage to her ecstasy,  
which was different from that word.  
She filled herself up. She  
shouted, my mouth pressed to her  
self-possessed body, which thrilled.  
I thrilled at fearsome pleasure. There's

no rush, but one must act. Communion  
occurs so variously, mysteriously,  
sometimes with stucco and asphalt  
nearby, and the rent due. I remember  
rubbing my face on her thighs and then  
on cotton sheets to get some wet and sweat  
off, not all. I licked my lips. I remember  
peace, the peace of  
a wordless afterwards. No rush, no rush  
at all. If this poem offends or bores you,  
you know why, and I hope you didn't read  
this far, but if you did, it's over now. Be well.





# Go As You Wish

Go as you wish into that good night.  
It's not a night, of course. It's death.  
To tell you how to die? I have no right.

Besides, death often hides nearby, plain sight—  
Then someone's gone, as quickly as a breath.  
Go as you wish into that good night.

Assuming you're allowed your wish, I might  
Not even be around, to tell the truth.  
To tell you how to die? I have no right.

I've not yet died, nor have I faced the fright  
Of certain death, so here's my guess:  
Go as you wish into that good night.

I sympathize with D.T.'s rage. That sight  
Of one who's dear about to die: *Damn death!*  
But still: go as you wish into death's night.  
To tell you how to die—I have no right.



# Dice

Fold night several times until  
it becomes a cube. The North Star  
shines on one side, Orion's Belt  
on another, and so on. Repeat the

process. You have two cubes.  
Now let your fist swallow both  
die. Hold your fist high, shake  
it against sky defiantly.

Make a wager with God.  
Toss the cubes onto  
a flat black velvet night. Look  
at the way the constellated cubes

have come to rest, inert  
and grave. Of course, you've lost.  
The House always wins. God is  
the House. The rest is sad casino.



# Channel-Crossing

Irish Girl sat on a crate,  
topside. Cigarette-smoke  
out of her mouth joined  
English-Channel mist.  
North American Me stood beside  
her oafishly. Everyone else  
but a bemused British crew  
was puking. A man threw up  
into the wind. Wet, pink  
pebbles flew our way. One hit my cheek.  
Below-decks, a *danse-macabre*  
of vomiters staggered,  
careened. Irish Girl and I  
didn't know why we  
weren't ill from riding the heaving,  
pitching barrel of a boat. Her  
smoke smelled fine. I  
made her laugh, once only,  
can't remember how. Her  
eyes were dark blue,  
her hair dark brown but  
with secret plans to become  
red. This was when  
the Chunnel was still  
a Jungian blueprint beneath  
the ocean. We docked, Ostend.  
Irish Girl took a train different from mine.  
A widening channel of years  
later, I do hope she's alive;  
never been sea-sick; and laughing.



# Villanelle: The Villain, L

The villain, L, disrupts this life of ours,  
And is, as the imbuer of desire,  
A criminal who deftly drains our powers.

Sometimes the villain, L, recedes and cowers,  
And lurks as others rush to douse a fire.  
The villain, L, disrupts this life of ours.

Is L for Love? For Longing, Lonely hours?  
For Lust or Loss? Or maybe just for Liar,  
A criminal who deftly drains our powers.

Could it be Language? Our Linguistic powers--  
That signifying engine which won't tire?  
The villain, L, disrupts this life of ours.

(In many languages other than ours,  
A different letter shall be used to hire  
A criminal who deftly drains our powers.)

Or L for Light, *fiat-ed* Big-Bang's flowers?  
By light, we know and, knowing, we desire.  
The villain, L, disrupts this Life of ours,  
A criminal who deftly drains our powers.



# Idiosynchronized

People we see once: flood of faces, coats,  
collars--on avenues and plazas, in markets,  
theaters, bars, banks, hospitals. A bent

shape hoeing weeds: one of us saw it once  
one place one time from a train: This  
is an example but only of itself. Its

singularity can't be transposed. Imagine  
you remember the person who interested you  
terribly in that café that morning that city.

Sure it happened, but you don't remember  
because once was not in fact enough. People  
we see once are our lives: Forgetting

them (we must), we lose whole arenas  
of the lived. Even ghosts return, but not  
this vast mass of once-only-noticed

which composes medium and matrix  
of our one time here. We are adjacent and  
circumstantial to strangers, just one jostle

of flux away from knowing next to everything  
about their lives. The river of moments takes  
a different channel; the one moment is nothing

now. The once-only appear, then appear to go to an Elsewhere that defines us. They proceed to get to know whom they get to know.

Their lives are theoretically real to us, like subatomic particles. To them their lives are practically real to them. From their

view, ours are not. We know they were there, vivid strangers, because they always are, every day. Like a wreath floating

on the ocean, memory marks a space abandoned. In large measure life is recall of spaces occupied. History

consists of someone who insists on being remembered, someone who insists on remembering, combinations of both.

Familiarity and routine join to work methodically; they manufacture things in recall. Vivid strangers are incidentally

crucial, indigenous to a present moment that is like a mist over a meadow, rising, evaporating just when we arrive, past as we are present.



# Civil Liberties Sonnet

A civil liberty might be defined  
As a chance to have a prayer to defend  
Oneself against a power that's aligned  
With secrecy and certitude, that's then  
Brought out much of the worst in some  
Of the cohort who enjoy power, which tends  
To unhinge folks. What, however, has been done  
Might be undone, with rights restored to mend  
The rips in practices that hold a clear  
And wary view of power. Checks and rein  
And oversights on reign: basic but dear.  
Unbounded power just tends to go insane.  
Since that's the way it is, that which concerns  
Our civil liberties is a priority that burns.



# Quantum Sonnet

Electrons here, electrons there, but no  
Transition anywhere. They disappear.  
They reappear--a quantum jump--or so  
It's been identified--not well, I fear.

For if the relocation were a jump,  
The jumping thing would stay in view.  
Electrons don't exactly make a *whump*  
When landing after leap. I know it's true

They're ultra-small. Perhaps there is a sleight  
Of light in sub-particulated world?  
Or maybe God hides in a burst of light--  
Photonic God, an energetic whirl

That makes and breaks the rules. Look there  
And here, but note an in-between does not  
appear.





# Novel: A Sonnet

There was a place where people lived a long,  
Long time. They soaked the place with their despair and  
overloaded it with lore and song.  
And then one day a stranger traveled there.

His presence was an irritant and salve,  
Of course--that dual role which strangers play.  
He saw someone and something he *must* have.  
His getting them, however, would betray

A secret waiting for him all along.  
A certain pressure grew under the weight  
of character and fate combined. A wrong  
Occurred and love turned into hate.

In more detail, the story stretches out  
Three hundred fifty pages, or thereabouts.



# Cosmic Status

If we add up all that we claim to know,  
The sum is zero when compared to Mystery.  
We are as nothing in the cosmic show.

Or do you disagree? Maybe it's so  
That we are in control, can claim to be,  
If we add up all that we claim to know.

If Universe is infinite or so,  
Then we're about as trivial as can be.  
We are as nothing in the cosmic show.

But if God is, well, then: there you go:  
Perhaps God made it all and let us see  
If we could claim to add up what we know.

Irrelevant or godly? Hard to know—  
A or B? And might there be an option C  
In which when we discover all we know,  
We're more than nothing in this cosmic show?



# Nub of the Matter

I hate to break this news to me:  
Logic dictates I don't matter.  
Out of not much matter, I am made,  
and such matter as I do comprise  
does not export significance.

Particles of matter disperse and reconvene  
anew. Any one state of particulate  
coherence may be lovely (rhododendron  
flower, woman's smile) or may be me, whom  
I like well enough, but in any case, what  
so ensues? In relation to everything,  
I'm merest particle of perpetual change.

Only matter can make me. I've already  
been made up. Dissolution's penciled in  
on a calendar Heraclitus keeps next  
to his bedside river of fire. Only God can make  
me matter. This is the nub of the matter,  
a God's honest truth.



# Wary Lyric

I live in wariness,  
which is no place.  
It is an atmosphere,  
a mental space.

Courtesy suggests I  
ought to give an image  
to sharpen what I mean.  
A coyote on a ridge:

It watches, listens, sniffs.  
Only hunger makes it vicious.  
Otherwise, it lives by wariness,  
is naturally suspicious

and alone, even in company.  
Me, too, to some degree.  
I live in wariness, a type  
of fear. That's me.



# Oh Ballad, Dear Ballad

"Oh father, dear father,  
where did you go?"

"I got drunk and drove  
the truck into snow."

"Oh mother, dear mother  
why do you cry?"

"'Cause I'm stuck at home  
caring for you, that's why."

"Oh grannie, dear grannie  
why are you so wise?"

"It's just a *schtick*, kiddo,  
like rolling your eyes."

"Oh, God, greatest God,  
do you listen to me?"

"You and six billion others,  
omnisciently."

"Oh life, dear life,  
what should I expect?"

"In good years, a job.  
on good days, a check."



# Ballad of the Micro-Town

The mountains round that town are sheer  
*Massifs* of stone. The town  
Lies glinting like a coin below.  
The river carves a frown.

I grew up there, so it was all.  
It was the world to me.  
That it and I were less than small  
I'd learn eventually.

To have grown up in a small town  
Is such a mini-fate,  
A shrunken destiny, at best,  
A morsel of time's bait.

If you are from a micro-town,  
Bravo to you from me.  
Our origins have blessed us with  
Well known obscurity.



# Duke Ellington

The headline from the *Sacramento Bee*  
Announced that Ellington had died. I think  
The article may have referred to him as one  
Of those things he really was. They got  
It right, if I recall: they said he was  
"A treasure"--treasure lost to us, to me,  
Who'd only just begun to understand  
What I'd been blessed to witness when I spent  
A few bucks on a ticket for a concert in  
A cafeteria--a break from writing essays for  
My English 1-B class. I got to hear  
Duke Ellington--in a college cafeteria.  
That night I was as privileged as a prince  
Who'd seen and heard Mozart conduct.  
Mere Rocklin was my Salzburg; Duke's jazz,  
Demotic classical. Duke Ellington had passed,  
The headline said. I thought of him, spot-lit  
That night, a black tuxedo, and the hair  
Brushed back. That's how he must have looked  
As he strolled past Archangel Gabriel.  
To Gabe he may have said, "We love you madly--  
But try it in a minor key this time."  
When I saw him, I was 18 and thought  
I knew just what Duke Ellington deserved.  
"He's royalty," I thought, "does not deserve  
This gig on cold linoleum." Time is

No satin doll who puts her arms  
Round you, and now I think I may have learned  
What Mr. Ellington believed that he deserved: To write, to  
play, and to conduct, as long  
as God would let him, and anywhere the bus

Or train or plane might go. The music does  
Not know it's in the cafeteria, or in  
A segregated Cotton Club. And Mr. Ellington,  
It's obvious, could take care of himself.  
Ah, heaven's black piano's always tuned.  
The A-Train glides like silk into the night.  
In Davis, California, and in Harlem, you  
Can see the sky, and hear "Mood Indigo."





# Langston Hughes and Barack Obama

Let's lay down some lines for Langston Hughes  
this day of news: 20 January 2009. A fine  
piece of the dream's no longer deferred,  
though the thought's occurred that Mr. Hughes

might focus on the people out of work  
or, working, out of money. We must recall  
he gave Roosevelt what-for. Still I see  
him in a Harlem bar, sitting next to Jesse B.,  
speaking in his clipped Midwest English,  
having sipped something fortified,

brown eyes bright and wide.  
He'd be smoking if they'd let him, saying  
or thinking, 'Lord, a day has come I never even  
dreamed to dream in 1921.' He'd go back  
to the brownstone with its small garden  
in front, sit down, and write a simple,  
profound lyric capturing the spirit of  
President Obama's day.

Cross the Jordan, cross the Nile, cross the Congo—and *that*  
Ocean, too. Cross the Harlem and the Hudson Rivers. Cross  
the Mississippi.

*Dear Madame Johnson:* Mr. Obama crossed the Potomac.  
That's a fact—no not some dream.  
Think of Mr. Hughes's rivers. The soul shivers.

# Blogosonnet

There's nothing spherical about the space  
In which innumerable web-logs all appear.  
It's just Electronville, the selfsame place  
That harbors radio, lightning, and fear.

A universe of language every day  
Big-bangs itself into hyper-existence  
On billions of screens—a cosmic spray  
Of texts that is galactically immense.

The Web is actually a firmament  
Of pixelated light. In fact, these blogs  
Aren't blogs so much as wee lights meant  
To light a billion mental strolls through bogs

Of collective and individual thought:  
This is what Gutenberg and Gates hath  
wrought.



## El Greco's *Christ on the Cross*

In El Greco's *Christ on the Cross*, earth rolls up into sky, which looks like sea-- and it's all one blue-black mass behind the hanging man who said his reign was not of this shifty world.

El Greco's Jesus, stuck at the center foreground, isn't handsome, looks up exhausted, is almost out of here. A city's suggested beyond and beneath nailed feet. It's no city you'd want to enter. Between the small mound of bones and limp urban spires, small men ride tiny white horses. There's

a flag, of course--a standard, which the painting's enormous blue note blows away like a dry leaf. Horses and men seem headed into a lifeless, lightless cave or copse. Without a doubt, the flag suggested power to occupied and occupiers both back then, as flags are meant to do. El Greco's study's an indelicate bruise of black-and blue.



# For the Birds

Here's to starlings  
who travel in clouds,  
and unsubtle ravens,  
who caw in louds.

Here's to robins,  
who run--then-stop,  
and jays climbing trees  
hop, comma, hop.

Here's to songbirds,  
sharp and small.  
Hell, here's to birds—  
toast them all,

including extinct ones,  
an awful loss,  
more so for the reason  
was likely us.

But let's not end there.  
It's too sad.  
Think of your favorite bird.  
Be glad.



# Skin-Scanner

As he scans my skin, the dermatologist  
talks politics. One of his eyes enlarges  
comically behind a magnifying glass.  
"Nobody changes Washington D.C.,"  
he says, focusing on a small brown  
constellation on my wrist. He deems  
it "odd but not dangerous." "The most  
anyone can do is play the system," he  
continues. My body grants

citizenship to new moles every year.  
Some are cherry-red. Most are dark brown.  
The dermatologist periodically checks  
their passports and letters of transit. He's  
the Border Patrol of my epidermis.  
"The drug companies," he says,  
"are raping the system. I can't believe  
what they charge for medicine." I'm

naked now before him. He looks  
at the scar from a melanoma-excision.  
"Looks fine--keep up the good work,"  
he says to my leg, which doesn't respond.  
All my moles applaud the compliment.  
I begin to add items of clothing to my  
mole-crowded body. The scanner

writes notes to himself about  
the case of my skin. He presses the pen  
hard into the surface of the paper.



# Skin's Stars

Freckles and moles and other colorations  
constellate skin's sky. Imagine connective  
lines, then conjure epidermal legends:  
huntress of the thigh, magic beetles near  
the feet, miraculous bird on the back of  
a hand. Or not. Go with the logistical reading,  
points on a dermatological map suggesting  
deeper strata of DNA, a digital code of  
ancient migratory patterns--ah, but also  
of collusions with sunlight. *Glory be to God*

wrote Hopkins, *for dappled things*,  
and skin qualifies: dot-commissioned  
by blots and bits of pigment, uncoalesced  
pointillist portrait painted on your body's  
parchment, a realistic abstract rendering.  
Scars appear like halted asteroids on this  
sky, or they try to get a message through  
using ghostly notation—something about  
the time you fell down on creek-slate or  
tried to break up a dogfight with one hand.



# A Wave in San Diego

A wave begins as a shrug  
in the Pacific. Its shape is  
a form beginning takes  
just before becoming dissolves  
into not-any-more. A lovely  
curve of water lifts itself and  
is carved by its own foamy,  
bladed edge. You can't say  
for sure the sudsy bubbles  
frothing sand a minute later  
were ever that wave, nor can  
you prove they weren't of  
it. You can believe  
you remember the wave,  
but that belief dissolves. You  
can take a picture, or several,  
but you will have a picture, or  
several, not the wave. Perception  
rolls through mind like a wave,  
breaks on a shore of forgetting,  
and more waves are always coming  
until mind ends. Waves of perception  
start with a wrinkle in reality,  
take and give shape simultaneously,  
as when for example you stand looking  
at a wave in San Diego.



# Like a Simile, As a Sign

Briefly astonishing, then gone,  
the semiotician vanished like a gray fox  
at dusk. Like a tectonic plate,  
the structuralist's bowels  
shifted. She quaked. Like the moon,  
the tides, the sun, and the seasons,  
the rhetorician repeated himself  
conventionally. As the banker dismissed  
the janitor's dignity with a sneer, so  
the academic Marxist derided poetry  
as bourgeois scribbling, even when  
practiced by a welder. As the feminist  
lauded the recovery of a lost novel,  
so the waitress frowned to see the size  
of the gratuity this scholar left. Like  
the universe, there is no thing. There  
is no thing like the universe.





# The Compost-Lesson

Aunt Nevada showed me  
a compost-heap between  
the ranch-house and her garden  
when I was 8. I don't remember  
what she said. I remember *that*  
she said, talking to me as if  
I were older than 8. She was trying  
to explain how composts worked  
and their relation to gardens.

The sounds of her explaining:  
these I heard and liked. They  
were human noise in a language  
I understood. She was an aunt  
providing linguistic nutrients  
to a nephew. I remember seeing  
a cracked white egg-shell  
and coffee-grounds in the compost.  
I remember a strong compost-  
smell--not unpleasant; earth-perfume.  
I saw fat red worms writhe  
as if they were having bad  
worm-dreams. Around the meadow

where the Zergas had built that ranch,  
conifer-covered Sierra mountains stood  
stately in full sunlight. Wind made leaves  
of cornstalks in Aunt Nevada's garden gossip.



## Evangelical Detour

On the way to deposit  
tithes in a secret account,  
a preacher lost his way,  
found himself misplaced in woods.

Hungry and bug-bitten  
beside a creek that smelled  
strongly of sewage, this  
preacher asked God

to direct him toward  
a way out. A weird  
child appeared then. There  
was something too wise

about her pallid face. There  
was no indication she lived  
anywhere but in  
those woods. Maybe, thought

the preacher, she lives nowhere.  
She said to him, "Throw the money  
away. Throw it, preacher, in  
the creek." He said, "No."

Of course he claimed the money  
belonged to God. It wasn't that  
the child disagreed. It was that  
she smiled thinly, sweetly.

She said, "Then throw it in  
the creek, preacher. Throw that cash  
in there. Do you doubt God  
will retrieve it if it belongs to Him?"

The preacher knew his powers  
of conviction had left the congregation  
of his mind. He was hungry  
and bug-bitten, lost in woods.

He feared the child more  
than any lacerating snake.  
He flung the money in the creek.  
He watched the currency float

on water like leaves. The child  
evaporated. The preacher  
was tempted to reach for the money,  
run after it. In his mind,

he saw it drying on the rocks.  
But he turned, and he left.  
He woke up in his car. A state  
trooper tapped on his window.

"Am I dead?" asked the preacher,  
after the window had come down.  
The servant of the people said, "No,  
sir, but you look like hell."



# Retired Oracle

Even oracles retire, weary of working  
for the future, fed up with telling the truth,  
a nasty business. The job-titles embarrass:  
*soothsayer, psychic, fortune-teller, card-reader,*  
*prophet, futurist, wizard, statistician, hustler.*  
Leaving the cave,

cubicle, or sound-stage for the last time,  
the oracle welcomes a future of telling lies,  
claiming ignorance, and getting things wrong.  
"Things wrong": what a laugh, thinks the oracle—things are  
either wrong or about to be.

That's the truth. Some people need an oracle to tell them  
so. Home at last, the oracle dreams of reading history, for  
who can predict the past? Books on shelves promise to tell  
the truth. The oracle looks at the volumes and needs to  
believe them.



# For Librarians

Imagine you can consider all ideas  
and images represented by all words  
and numbers in all libraries worldwide.  
Open the book of this consideration.  
Touch the paper. See the illustration  
of you, reading, when you were ten  
in your local library. Turn  
several pages. Now read how you  
and that other person ignited romance  
in, of all places, the stacks, third floor,  
in quite a different library. Snowflakes  
brushed against dark glass as you two  
stood between PQ and PR.

Now go to the index. Find “possibility.”  
Look up from the book. The librarian  
who looks away was watching you.  
She knows how to phrase the question  
you want answered.

Librarians know where wisdom’s stored.  
They catalogue the countless forms  
of silence and tell people what they  
didn’t know they wanted to know.  
They treat the mentally fractured  
as if they’re whole, the dull as if they’re  
sharp, Winter as if it’s Summer.

A band of sunlight angles through high  
windows brightens shoes of a librarian,  
who knows the patron in the gray enormous  
coat will steal a book about sex or wiccans.  
She knows some Christians will steal books

deemed Satanic, ignoring a commandment  
and the homeless person sleeping in a chair.  
She knows some atheists treat Library as  
church, so when she moves into shadows,  
she does so quietly. She worries for books.

For the librarian knows books are easily burned, recycled,  
or digitized, reduced to Oxygen, carbon, silicon, and such  
basic Elements as hate and budgetary cuts. She wishes  
presidents of the  
United States would Consult librarians before going to war.  
It would Save so much time, so many lives. She knows  
exactly which references  
know how badly any war will go and how soon  
citizens come to loathe their leaders. She Knows how to  
find stories about all the Libraries wiped out by war. She  
knows patrons Who've been harmed by war. Sometimes  
they Set off alarms.  
Someone asks her, "Can you help me find out  
if I'm related to Napoleon? " Yes," she answers,  
"Come with me, please."

All libraries may now gather inside invisible  
electrons. After closing time, books in Sweden  
send emails to maps in Chile. A librarian in Topeka posts a  
reply to one in Tokyo, adding to  
a blue thread wrapped around the globe.

As sincerely as librarians worry for books, for shelves, for  
catalogues, buildings, and best Practices, so should we  
worry for librarians, for  
images and ideas.

At a table in a library, a circle of light  
lies on a book. The hand not writing turns  
the page, and something important happens.



# Insurance

Is your abode too close to the river?  
Does your home sit astride a fissure  
between slabs that uphold illusions  
of real estate? Is there a slope  
above or below your place  
that will one day fall for rain?

Perchance, did you build  
a match-factory next to a field  
full of dry, oily brush? Well, wherever  
you live, your roommate is risk—  
statistically. Pay us, please, in case

your relationship with risk becomes  
more, or less, than Platonic. Rest  
insured. If the river riots or Earth's  
complexion cracks, if all falls down  
or bursts into blaze, then count

your blessings, muse on ruination,  
and wait for our reply. In the meantime,  
we'll be watching data gather round  
the mean. We'll keep your money  
in a vault well away from risk,  
from you. We'll keep your money safe,  
where it can work in peace for us. If  
you should find you need us, well,

let's just see what happens, shall we?



# Rampant Significance

There's too much meaning. Everywhere  
you refuse to turn, something means.  
Messages are getting across. Answers  
proliferate like dust mites. Typhoons  
of information saturate our land.

In my mind I found the image  
of a solitary Sumerian slowly  
etching text into stone. The notion  
of a billion text-messages per  
[insert unit here] then swept

the Sumerian and his chisel away like  
an ant on a twig in a flash flood. No one  
has time to be absurd. People  
furiously make themselves understood.  
To what end? Points are being stressed.





# The Clothing

Laundry in a basket still wore  
some of sun's expenditure  
and breeze's perfume.

Eventually, we put on these  
washed things. They led us  
back out into sunlight, into  
lakes of air. We wear

the repetitions of our days,  
dress our bodies with our ways,  
fold clothes of our woven  
consciousness, put them  
in closets of memory, hang  
them in dreams, where they  
re-costume themselves  
in carnivals of synaptic light.

People from an old civilization  
called Time sit beside a slow  
river, rubbing wet cloth with  
stones, paying no attention to  
the gods who splash and cavort  
nearby, who rise from the river,  
and cloth themselves in sky.



## Any Storm in the Port

The coastline forms a question-mark,  
which punctuates the sentence of this day.  
From where you live, you cannot see  
buildings that display a harbor-view.  
No ship docking down there will bring  
adventure to your life. Even the cargo,  
quotidian as it is, will be shipped elsewhere.

Idly, you wish for strange weather--  
hurricane, tsunami, dead-calm, lock-down  
fog. This wish would be irresponsible if  
linked to a reality outside your head. You'd  
never kill an albatross, interrupt a whale's  
progress, organize or break a strike. You

are a cove that occasionally dreams  
of being a bay. Viking--you might have  
been a Viking. --Not a berserker hacking  
villagers but a rower who would pull  
the boat in a gray unmapped direction  
for as long as it took or until you died.  
You're that sort--a kind history never  
notices from its panoramic view. You  
pull your life through life.



# Clear a Place For Good

Make room for something good to happen. Clear a place—there, perhaps, on a purple divan; or here, on a warm, flat rock. Yes, of

course, nothing good may arrive, in which case you may occupy the place yourself and call it good. You may watch as something good

happens in that space you just vacated. It doesn't always work this way. Still, make some room. Some room for good.



# How to Get Ideas for Poems

It's surprisingly easy. Since you're already in your mind, even if others claim you're not, just look around in there and see what's on the shelves and prairies, in the tunnels and trade-shows: sharks, appliances, jeans, turnips, primal scenes. Maybe foaming dog-mouths  
full of teeth.

Scan acres and vistas of words—native, transplanted, farmed, found, pilfered, grafted, milled, mulched. It's a sometimes forgotten fact that poems are made of words.

Allergies and outrages are good. Grudges, too. Love? Sure. Why not? Do what you have to do. You and your mind are already in the world, in spite of jokes philosophers tell, so you don't have to make a special trip to peaks, Paris, bull-fighting rings, deserts, or dance-halls to find what advertisers call inspiration.

If you want inspiration, just keep breathing. (If you want anything, just keep breathing.) The poems will follow. Some ideas will cling the way stickers stab socks when you walk through brush and grass. Others will settle—shadow, soot, silt, and shock. Some will pound on the mind's door like a drunken neighbor who came back to the wrong house. Some

will whisper and mumble like spies, gossips, gamblers, and prophets. Basically, just let it slip that you're a poet. The news will get around your mind, and there will be no end to the ideas. You'll have to fight them off with poems.



# How To Write A Poem

First, clear the area of critics.  
Next, grab an image or a supple  
length of language and get going.  
It's all you now. Mumble, sing,  
murmur, rage, rumble, mock,  
quote, mimic, denounce, tell,  
rock, or tease. Recall, refuse, regret,  
reject. Dive, if you dare, into  
psychic murk. Down there grab  
the slick tail of something quick.  
Hold it if you can. Meanwhile,  
bellow, bellyache, browbeat,  
cry, or call, for all I care. I care.  
Invent like the conning, conniving  
poet you are, you lying spitter  
of literature, you. Make it for  
yourself and fit it to you. You  
might as well. Readers, editors,  
teachers, preachers, profs, and  
publishers aren't your friends.  
Other poets are busy with their own  
poems and problems. Famous poets  
are off being remarkable geniuses,  
eccentric visionaries, sunken wrecks,  
dead, dead-drunk, or pains in the ass.  
Say what you see, see what you say,  
write it for love and for free. Own what  
you write and give it away. Language  
will always love you back, so lay a wet kiss  
on the words, and when and if in doubt,  
remember: what you want to be is to be writing.



## Before Katrina

*What size, what color, how many?*  
said the New Orleans T-shirt merchant.

*Say, buddy, jus' a minute, jus'*  
*a minute,* said a drunk man  
on Canal Street, his life misplaced

behind his eyes somewhere. *Talk to*  
*you for a minute?* he asked.  
Later I stood behind gauze  
of hotel drapery looking

at charcoal silhouettes of  
financial towers, night. I'd given  
the boozy man some money.  
To the street-vendor,  
I'd said *big, blue,* and *one.*



# Phantom Pantoum

From the reeds of memory's marsh,  
The phantom pantoum speaks itself.  
It isn't owned by anyone.  
It is composed of gathered sounds.

The phantom pantoum speaks, itself  
An act of filling up a page or pause.  
It is composed of gathered sounds.  
It is a thing that's said and made.

An act of filling up a page or pause  
May satisfy the phantom pantoum.  
It is a thing that's said and made  
But not one, maybe, that's heard or seen.

"May satisfy the phantom pantoum":  
That is not a bold assertion,  
Nor one, maybe, that's heard and seen.  
The phantom pantoum is like a dream.





# Sonnet in a Bar

I sat beside a sonnet in a bar.  
The sonnet looked done in. I bought a round.  
The sonnet sipped its rye and said, "Too far.  
"I've come too far and lived too long. The sound  
Of iambs thumping drives me mad.  
And yet if someone called me up on stage,  
I'd sing the syllables, and I'd look glad."  
"What must a sonnet be?" I asked. "A page,"  
The sonnet said, "a one-page hunk of verse.  
If you're a poet, then I'm going to scream."  
I bought another round. "It is a curse  
To be a lyric-form that people deem  
Enduring but others try to kill for good.  
And--oh: the rhyme I think you'll want is "hood."



# Molecular Mood

Molecular in nature were the two,  
For they were human, and therefore made  
Of carbon, protein, fat--the usual stew  
Of which stuff in this matter, fact, is said

By scientists to be composed. But how  
Does one molecular composite reach  
The point at which it loves, the point called Now Wherein  
one body-mind, by means of speech,

Decides and then declares this thing called Love,  
A concept generated by uncounted other  
Molecular composites, the stuff of  
Which Civilization's made? Whatever.

The she loves him; the he loves her. Their cells  
Conspire to cast reciprocating spells.



# Salongen och Skogen

By Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783-1847)

Stojande verld, du mig plågar!  
Hvar fines stillhet? Dit vill jag vandra.  
På allt havad hjertat frågar  
Ej får du svar af dig sjelf, ej af andra.

Hellre I skogen jag vankar.  
Aftonens fläkt genom kronorna susar  
Men mina stilla tankar  
Hör jag ändå, fastän skogen brusar.

## Polite Society Versus The Woods

(translated from the Swedish by Hans Ostrom)

Noisy world, you plague me!  
Where is there stillness? I'll go there.  
An old heart must not ask  
Hard questions of itself or of another.

I'd much rather wander in woods  
Than watch days get devoured by official  
fervor.

My languorous thoughts long  
For a forest, listen for its steady murmur.



# Critic

She prefers poetry that arrives already  
branded with authority, stamped with  
approval. Literature is her business,  
and business abhors an accident,  
such as a wilderness crying in a voice,  
or a great poem left anonymously on  
someone's doorstep. Anthologies aren't orphanages, she  
thinks; they're  
consolidations, portable museums, banks.

In photographs of her, bookshelves rise  
behind her like battalions, she will not smile,  
and she looks ready to retaliate with one  
swift blow of erudition should you express  
an opinion. Her criticism is like vinyl  
siding. It isn't poetry. It isn't necessary.



# Door Poem

Some doors are made of wood,  
and some of fear.  
Inside, you hear  
the knocking; wonder: Should

I open up to what I cannot see?  
Outside, you knock,  
don't try the lock,  
think: What, who, might greet me?



# Elsewhere

Do you wonder what people are doing Elsewhere?  
If you do, then I do. I'm here, which is Elsewhere  
o you, who are Elsewhere, too, to me.

I know what people are doing here. Sometimes  
it makes me cry. I hold out hope, therefore,  
for Elsewhere. I don't know why. I imagine

other, better, things; breathe easily; sigh.  
Elsewhere's where we need to meet, I think,  
to ask us why we cannot ever get along

right here, where good will seems to die.  
Maybe Elsewhere is the place in which our  
better selves might resettle to repair

the damage done by tawdry instincts  
by and by. I think of Elsewhere, I see,  
as a place amenable to possibility.



## Woman In A Waiting-Room

I guess her age to be 80. She's kept herself looking the best she can: lean like a late aunt of mine. The gray hair's tinted blond but cut with no-nonsensical reserve—the style's what they used to call "page-boy."

Trousers, a sweater, sensible beige shoes. Her back hardly lets her bow to examine magazine-covers on a table. She squints and scowls so hawkishly, that I think for a moment she's spotted a spider. She selects none of the magazines: wise.

She sits now and looks out western windows, lifts her face to muted afternoon light, takes out a compact, and applies red lipstick. Blue eyes above lightly rouged cheeks look coolly into the mirror's report. She's not looking for approval, only information. She forms her lips as she has done for more than six decades. Compact and lipstick disappear. She settles into the chair, into defiant patience, and waits, newly painted lips pursed, for her doctor's nurse to open a door and call her name.



# Worrisome Quatrain

I like to worry about  
things I can't control.  
It works as well as eating  
from an empty bowl.





## August Afternoon

A breeze off Puget Sound curls  
around a corner of the abode,  
rushes through a line of herbal  
foliage--three kinds of mint,  
a stout rosemary plant, parsley,  
chives, oregano, thyme, and  
leathery-leafed sage. The breeze  
organizes an aromatic syndicate,  
which bargains collectively with  
a gardener's sense of smell  
on an August afternoon.



# Horizon

No one can measure the distance to the horizon, only the distance from it.

The horizon doesn't exist, but it must.

One must determine the place between high tide and low tide, then measure up

to the point from which one wants to

envisage the horizon, which is a fiction resting on a line by the angle above sea-

level from which one overlooks ocean. Okay?

There is no fixed point to the horizon, or to measurement, or to looking at the sea,

or even to living next to the ocean, a notion.

There is a sea, a coast, two tides, a triangle tied to a plane on a sphere. Let's grant these,

please. There is no horizon, except insofar,

so far, as something seems to end out there a certain uncertain distance from here. There

is no distance like show-distance to the horizon

because if one travels it, the distance, then the horizon will have moved away. Still

one is free to measure by the sea. They can't take that away from thee. One is free to look and to say, "Look, there's the horizon." Okay?



# Strong Views

On the narrow road rising steeply  
to Sierra City's cemetery, a  
sign advises, "Not A Through Street."  
(*No shit.*) We set the headstone of a dead aunt  
next to a rock wall her brother, now also  
dead, built. We place beneath the concrete

a full bottle of whiskey, a  
horseshoe, a deer antler, and  
a piece of rose quartz. Otherwise,  
the aunt's not represented here  
except in our memories. Her  
ashes travel up by an alpine  
lake somewhere. The family's  
idiosyncratic, you might say,

and tardy, even haphazard, with  
its burial rituals. In fact, there  
are no rituals, no funerals or  
formalities. People get together  
eventually, share some laughs  
and glum grief, eat, and drink.  
And laugh more. We're gladly morbid.

A panting black dog lies  
in the pickup truck watching us lay  
the headstone. Later, the aunt's  
two remaining brothers will visit  
the stone in the shade, have  
a look, say a total of, oh,  
seven words, maybe. For now,

we kid around in the cemetery,  
get the job done—nobody's god-  
damned business but our own, and  
if anyone should ask for a permit,  
God help them. Goodbye  
to Aunt Nevada. The smooth blue  
stone, saved from an arastra,  
gives the pertinent dates, her  
other last name, and a nickname—  
then mentions, "Strong Views."



# Horse-Trail, High Sierra

Riding horses in the High Sierra, we take  
trails threaded through hulking conifers,  
bypass a Maidu ceremonial hill  
covered with black gravel. Breezes off  
Gold Lake wrangle scents of wildflowers,  
thick aroma of skunk-cabbage, corn-lily,  
and a plant that some call mountain misery.  
The horses snort thin air. There's sign of bear.

Lightning felled a tree not long ago.  
Now new thunder-clouds amass explosive,  
creamy ambition over blue distant peaks,  
east. Alpine meadows seem closer to  
Paradise than most places, at least  
in this easy summer's ride. The

sun-scalded cowgirl from Portola  
leading the way shifts on the saddle  
and hollers unsentimentally, "This  
tree you're passing's over 300 years old."



# Poem By the Side of the Road

Here is a poem that lives  
by the side of a road  
in the form of a shack  
with a tin chimney stack  
and a recluse stirring inside.

Walk on the road past  
the shack if you will; see fine  
dust rise from your foot-fall,  
and if you're brave, shout a call  
to the recluse stirring inside.

A poem is a shack, and a  
shack is a poem, or  
so the tautology flows. What's true  
of poems and shacks? Who knows?  
The recluse stirring inside.



# Highest Form of Art

"I regard," said the famous novelist, "tragedy to be the highest form of art." We were meant gravely to absorb this highest form of her opinion. One among us, however, sneezed. Another, a notorious literalist, believed a makeshift sculpture on the Himalayas to be the highest form of art. A third believed tragedy to be the lowest form of the raw deal offered by Life.

None of us spoke, though, until later. We knew enough not to disagree publicly with a famous, highly paid literary guest, who seemed to be running a mild royal fever; who appeared to be slightly flushed with her current stature, the highest form of her reputation.





# A Writer of Parables

Once there was a writer of parables who aimed to treat his readers' maladies with narrative caplets of wisdom. Almost no one read his parables, for almost no one read, and those who did read had many reading choices. The few who read his parables didn't know the parables were meant instructively to heal. They liked the parables, however, because they were short and crisp like chopped stalks of celery. There was the parable of the blind fashion-photographer; of the return of the responsible daughter; of the man who would play only a rented harp; and so on. Finally the writer of parables wrote himself into a parable. He dissolved into a little bit of his own home-made wisdom and entered the bloodstream of culture, completely absorbed.



# Fleeting Real

There will always be time to talk  
of politics, money, and law. Speak  
of one, and you speak of all three.  
See the gray cat sitting on a blue chair?  
That's where we might begin instead.

We might also speak of hand-carved  
spoons, fossils in a dream, or languid  
lovers' restless fingers. The rest  
is history, a kind of tidied up  
lie or a molten sack of evil,  
depending upon your point of skew.

When a horse smells lightning,  
a millennium's sadness sways.  
Let's imbibe words on matters  
such as these. The fleeting is  
the real, as is a fantasy of  
reeling in a moment that glanced  
at memory's bait, declined to bite,  
and dove to settle in the murk  
far below an angler's flaccid geometry.



# Bear Nearby

Tonight a bear's at the perimeter,  
beyond where cabin-lights dissolve.  
The animal breaks brush and gulps air,  
snorts, working hard, and we hear this.  
We glance up at *Ursa Major* above  
the Sierra Buttes, a risen massif.

We figure the bear's breaking down  
an apple tree now and gorging—wild  
and deliberate, focused and irascible.  
We don't walk closer. The bear doesn't  
advance. There's a distance to be kept.

There's a fascination in the dark,  
which entertains a big invisible mammal  
whose family's lived here since before  
any human named constellations or  
eavesdropped on night's business.



# Moon-Shot 1969: The Missing Article

Somewhere between the moon and the Sierra Nevada, our TV-reception got fizzed. We leaned in toward the Zenith set that labored to freight us images of Armstrong. Outside, illusory sky still pretended to be blue. " . . .one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," said the Zenith, and I knew the first man on the moon had flubbed prefabricated lines. The article "a" was missing, and without it, "man" and "mankind" meant pretty much the same thing in 1969. The article

"a" is still missing. It tumbles in the Milky Way, silent in an unspoken vacuum. Yes, yes, I was properly amazed like everyone else. And a little sad. After a cumbersome astronaut stepped off a ladder and set feet, the moon misplaced its mythology and became dirt and destination.



# Man In A Hole

In summer's citified humidity, one man pierced a street's asphalt hide with a jack-hammer. Then someone else in a yellow back-hoe dug something like a grave. Soon another man was standing in the hole. Orange plastic cones stood sentry around him. He wore a white hard-hat and an orange vest. Cars passed thickly by on both sides, hauling their noise, puffing exhaust-fumes, hardly slowing down. The man's height had been cut in half. His co-workers looked down at him expectantly, as if he could fix anything—sewer, water, electricity, earthquakes. "People give me shit," he yelled, "and I'm tired of it!"



# Sestina: The Game of Baseball

The circle is the center of the game:  
The trip from home to home; mound; ball.  
And Baseball's creed is O-penness: fields;  
Gloves, bird's mouths; past fences lies forever.  
The game plays out in formulae of three.  
Combinations interlock like rings.

Grave umpires speak in prophecy that rings  
Out in the voice of Moses. *Out, Strike, Ball*  
Mean really *Shame, Yes, No!* The game  
Is subtle, though, like its faintly sloping fields.  
And indefinite: A game can last forever  
In theory, infinitely tied at 3 to 3.

Though rules say nine may play, it's often three  
Who improvise a play within the game.  
(Tinkers, Evers, Chance). Pitcher lends ball  
To air. Potentiality of bat rings  
With power in that instance. All fields  
Beckon to innocence and hope forever.

One chance at a time drops from forever.  
Player with a caged face grabs for ball.  
But batter knocks ball back into the ring  
Of readiness, at which point one of three  
Things happen that can happen in the game:  
Safe or Out or Ball-Beyond-All-Fields:

Home run. Inspire the ball past finite fields,  
And you voyage honored on the sea that rings  
The inner island. Sail home, touch three  
White islands, Hero. Gamers since forever  
Have tried to sail past limits of the game,  
Shed physics' laws, hold Knowledge like a ball.

To know this game you have to know the ball,  
An atom when contrasted with green fields—  
Less than orange, white with pinched rings  
Of stitches ridged for grip. With ball come three  
Clear tasks: throw, catch, bat. These are forever  
Of the Circle in the Center of the Game.

Dropped in the fluid game, the solid ball  
Starts widening rings of chance, concentric threes That  
open out into the Field. Baseball.  
Forever.



# Memo From November 6th Street

They make it work somehow in Memphis,  
bluff buttressed against an oceanic  
river. Vines overwhelm scruffy trees,  
weariness overtakes work, and Downtown  
pines for its heyday. You know the story:  
Handy, Rufus, B.B., Elvis, Booker T.  
& 'nem fused grooves like welders  
building barges bound for big water.  
They made it work somehow.

Sir, ma'am, if you want to, you can  
sit in a black iron chair next to where  
Johnny & June Cash and Ella wrote their  
names in cee-ment. Pigeons and a goat  
will stare down at you as you stare up  
at a plastic palm tree & you'll drop money  
into a yellow bucket, sit back down,  
and listen to covers of Albert King,  
Robert Johnson, Stevie Ray Vaughn,  
Son House, and Otis Redding. *Looks like  
nothing's gonna change* in Memphis.  
Then it does. Then it doesn't. They  
have to dredge the channel regularly.



Meanwhile I have to check out the Just  
Like New consignment-store on November 6th  
Street—Memphis, yes, sir: Memphis—caught  
in a corner between Arkansas and Mississippi,  
between St. Louis and New Orleans, mid-South.  
They make it work somehow. Somehow they make it.



# Memphis Monologue

No, sir, I'm not from Memphis. I'm from New Orleans, but I came to Memphis after the Hurricane. There was nothing left for me down there. Been here ever since, but it's tough. I haven't been able to find much work—the economy; and all. If you like barbecue, you might try the Rendezvous. You have a good evening, sir.



# Adjustment Denied

The man from the Building  
came to adjust the Psychiatrist's  
thermostat. He called the Doctor  
from the Waiting Room. The electrons  
of his voice spoke to those of  
Voice Mail. He left a Message.

"I am from the Building. I have  
come to adjust your thermostat. I  
am in the Waiting Room." Beyond  
the barrier of messaging, there  
was no Answer. Air, however,  
spoke in a constant whisper  
through the ducting of the  
Building, as the Doctor, so  
the man from the Building guessed,  
talked and listened to a Patient  
in an Office which was too Cool,  
too Warm, who knows?



# A Little Something That Refrains

Let's write a little something that refrains  
From trying to be more than poetry.  
The language moving in a poem obtains.

For language is an actor, plays and feigns,  
And hopes we'll see what it wants us to see.  
Let's write a little something that refrains

Itself in lyric and won't grab for gains,  
But is content simply to seem and be  
The language, moving. In a poem, "obtains"

Can take an object or refuse. The lanes  
Of speech form labyrinths. Let's drink some tea.  
Let's write a little. Something that refrains

Might well refresh. The mind's eye strains  
Relentlessly, desires profundity.  
The language moving in a poem obtains:

It's there like creeks and rivulets from rains.  
Word-lovers lap up language happily.  
Let's write a little something that refrains.  
The language moving in a poem obtains.



# Because Comparisons Matter

Leaving aside a summer's day, what would you like to be compared to? A winter's night? A rhino's hoof? A traffic jam in Athens, Toronto, or Beijing? You tell us. At

Comparative Poetry Enterprises (CPE), LLC, we try to satisfy the subject of our poetry. Our philosophy is that good market-research leads to good poetic analogies. No disrespect to Shakespeare, but times have changed.

The poetry-market is tough, especially in the Analogy and Love sectors, which have been saturated. We're CPE: dedicated to making the right comparison for you. Contact us for a free, no-obligation trial-poem. You'll be glad you did! CPE . . . where comparisons are incomparable.



# Chardin's *Still Life With Fish*

I've noticed how, in Jean-Siméon Chardin's *Still Life with Fish, Vegetables, Gougères, Pots, and Cruets*, the paint becomes Plexiglass because it seals off odors I seek. Or should I say "aromas"—odors formally attired? Chardin's

manipulation of pigment teases me with an imaginary robust stench of French kitchens, dead cool slimy fish hanging above vegetables and such. Chardin invites me to the unstill kitchen, then closes the glass door

firmly, and I'm left with an inedible, unsniffable scene. Well done, *monsieur*, to taunt the nose of an olfactory voyeur in the deep-freeze of an art gallery.



# The Time-Drunk

"I got out of bed last night to go to the bathroom, and I started walking backwards. Strange things happen when you get old." — Passenger on the Amtrak Cascade train

"Beyond a black hole's gravitational border—or event horizon—neither matter nor light can escape."  
—Discovery.com

He got drunk on time, toxed with sips  
of minutes, gulps of years, dregs of  
decades. Now he staggers down alleys  
of memory behind Chronology's moist  
row of pubs, saloons, clubs, and dives.

A lifelong drinker of time, he knows  
how drunk he is but not where. Surfaces  
bump him, rough him up. Gravity trips  
him using cobblestones and curbs. He  
finds a door he thinks he recognizes,

enters a noise, finds the bar, orders  
a wee timetail. The one behind the bar  
refuses, judges, speaks the savage,  
polite words, "You've already had enough.  
I can pour you a cup of coffee, though,

or call you The Cab." He assumes the false dignity of a confronted tippler. He mumbles, "The Cab." Waiting, he negotiates. To the one behind the bar, he says, "Come on. One more?"





# If I Were A Werewolf

If I were a werewolf, I'd know  
where werewolves live. Most  
must hail and howl from  
imagination, I imagine, but some  
might come from some place  
outside the town of Lore.

Were I a werewolf, how would I behave?  
Hirsutely, rudely, carnivoraciously?  
I guess so, but maybe less so  
than cinema would have it. Perhaps  
I'd chiefly want to be alone,

dened up on some steppes, serenading  
the loony moon, napping and scratching  
like any other mammal. Or maybe  
werewolves run in packs like lawyers,  
politicians, and beer, in which case

I might have to have a role, a niche,  
a boss, a pledge of loyalty, a werewolf  
oath or anthem—the usual frightening  
stuff that makes the atavistic hair  
on the back of the neck rise up.



# Celebrity Author

I think I know what the celebrity-author was thinking: *Get me out of here*. He wore fame like a hair-shirt. The thing is, the money is great, adulation's like liquor, and it's nice to be thought a genius. So there he was, and there we were. . . .

He squirms and fidgets. He goes on too long and comments on his commenting like a daft monarch. He doesn't like other people's wit because it shows everybody's witty and fame is as arbitrary than not. Of course,

we'd all trade places with him in the Land of Hypothetica, especially because we'll never have to. He won the lottery, he's a good writer, and there's a wider justice in his fame. Still,

he itches and scratches, poses and opines, tries to say shocking things, grins guiltily, reminds us of his fame and wit and money at paced intervals, and suspects what he knows to be true: that we, too, can't wait for the evening to be over.



# His Photos Were Not His

The temporary celebrity wasn't celibate. He deleted from "his" hard drive photos of himself and others frolicking in "privacy." Digital piracy ensued. A Dickensian clerk at the local rag-and-computer-parts recycling shop recognized the fellow and reconstituted images from the celeb's impersonal computer, sold them, and they enjoyed a viral notoriety on screens around our sad and rocky globe.

The celeb and his publicist met the media and were quoted. The clerk got fired and paid a fine. There is no line. No one owns anything: prophets have murmured this news to us over eras. Now the Internet has made their knowledge common. *Intellectual property* and *private photos* languish in the Ozymoronic Lounge, sipping mocktails next to an irrelevant highway. The celeb should have hammered the hard drive with a sledge, but paparazzi would have clicked a thousand images of that, so there you go, and so it goes.



# Oakland Is There

Gertrude Stein famously said a lot of famous things fashioned to be famously remembered tenderly such as, of Oakland, California, U.S.A., "there's no there there," but after she left and eventually went to Thereville, France, the There of Oakland that had actually always been There remained There in her absence.

See, Oakland had and has persons, places, and things—the stuff that composes the There of any place from Paris to Bangkok, Vladivostok to Lesotho, Aberdeen to Montevideo. Gertrude wanted more, or less (who knows?) from Oakland. —Some irony to that since she possessed the Oaklandish visage of a stevedore or boxing promoter, a face with angles and planes in which Picasso found a lot of There to paint in the portrait he painted.

Gertrude wrote some inlandish Oaklandese sentences and hit some of them right on the button, and then she died. Oakland's still there. Who are more alike than Gertrude Stein and Al Davis? Both willed their wills on art and sport. Oakland's There was there all along, and will be, and is, is there, and there you have it.



# Old Seagull

One old white seagull prowled wet grass  
near brick buildings, looking for worms.  
It walked arthritically and seemed chilled.

A lone, hunched seagull is a dignified  
defeat, a sign of how hopeless hope is.  
Was the bird's eyesight still good enough

to see worms? Did the bird ache? Do  
seagulls fly back to the beach to die,  
or do they get stranded on a street,

eaten by a crow or a raccoon? The  
seagull was a general in exile,  
a feathered Napoleon on Elba.

It was a heroic nun, a white flag  
hanging from a wall of a blasted fort.  
The gull seemed to know everything.

It kept its routine of life.  
Walking past, I admired the bird,  
which ignored me, which I admired.



# Rhinoceros

Evolution left rhinoceros holding  
a heavy load, freighted down with  
muscle, bone, horns, and heft, all  
held up by four short legs.

Rhino, you're an envoi from dinosaurs.  
People are your predators, as ubiquitous  
as sunlight, as shifty as shadow,  
lethal and silly: grinding your horn  
into powder? How fucking stupid is that?  
I like the way you stare

sadly straight down the tunnel of  
history. I like that rough-hewn  
stone spike you carry on your face  
but would never want to own it.

Let hummingbirds be nuanced. Some  
creatures need to be as subtle  
as an avalanche. Big leathery  
rhino, you're among these, and not  
that your large ears will process  
this word as meant, but *Thanks*.



# About Hobbema's Landscape

*(Meindert Hobbema, 1638-1709)*

Hobbema's "A Wooded Landscape with Travelers on a Path through a Hamlet": clouds, trees, and shadows overwhelm people and buildings.

Even a patch of sunlight, mid-painting, might be ominous, a precursor to thunderstorm. Villages, hamlets, and no-account small towns live on the edge of being devoured,

one way or another. They are beside nature's point--are one tornado, flood, avalanche, or economic downturn away from obliteration. I'm sure Hobbema had something else in mind with these pigments, the tracks left by his traveling strokes. I like how he knew foliage, clouds, and shadow lord over a mere hamlet made of brick and milled wood.



# Towards Evening

The muted roar of tidal surge  
sounds like a convergence of one  
million whispers.

Reflection of the sun's unrolled  
like a ragged carpet on the surface  
of the sea.

To touch the wind with your tongue  
is to taste ancient salt and conjure  
braids of kelp.

Soon the sea will say its vespers  
deep inside its tidal whispers.





# Small Garden

When carrots come up, they're green hairs on Earth's loamy pate. Already, though, they're pointing covert orange fingers toward Earth's molten core. Carrots like cool weather. Tomato-plants don't and therefore hunker. They hold out for the blaze, in which they'll then sprawl promiscuously and weigh themselves up with serious loads of red. That said, lettuce is the lovely one, presenting delicate textiles of itself to sun. So goes growth in post-Edenic gardens, fallen and common, full of manure and worms. They're seedy, sketchy, weedy, vetchy, half-cultivated, half-rude, all vulgar. Water and weed, heed the almanac, fill a sack or two at harvest time: all to the good.



# The River Moved

I get used to watching rivers move from up to down. Then someone will remind me, "The river used to be here until it moved," and I picture rivers walking slowly across plains, opening another canyon for themselves, going underground for a spell, or running into dams--nibbled by turbines and turned into a lake that sits and waits but never loses its desire to find a sea. The way rivers move's a note slowly written in cursive to time, whose mail historians and geologists open. For instance the famous river-boat that sank's buried on a dry plain now because the big river moved. "It's just a grave now," someone said. "Bones are down there, remember. No one wants to dig."



# Spuds

Potatoes grow out of potatoes like an underground dynasty while the rest of agriculture bustles above-ground with blossoms, pods, and fruits. Potatoes multiply themselves in sequestered arithmetic. They send up gestures of leaves to appease sunlight. Meanwhile, they populate their tomb, glow inwardly, will stand for harvest or sit tight--possess a kind of divine patience, an honest secrecy.

Spuds aren't glamorous, decorative, geometric, or vibrant. They're lumpy, plain, idiosyncratic, and common. They get along with rocks, advise moles, ignore frost, and huddle in carbohydrate caucuses.



# No Strings Attached

He told her he preferred a relationship with no strings attached. She said she preferred strings attached. For instance, she wore an anklet woven of string. Sometimes she kept her hair back with a simple elastic circle of string. Her clothes were made of threads, a kind of string. And, she added, she preferred to keep her clothes on at least for the immediate future. She

said that if he and she were to take a long walk into a relationship, she would want to tie bits of string to branches so she'd know the way out for sure in case they got lost.

He said, "It's just an expression." "You mean like 'string of words'?" she asked. "It means," he said, "I'm not your puppet and you're not mine. It means 'no commitment'." She said, "Your shoe's untied." He looked down. It was untied. She wasn't kidding. He knelt to tie the string of the shoe. When he arose, he saw that she'd vanished, no strings attached.



# Mongrel

Our operatives have determined he's not worth our operatives' time. He's anti-social but polite. He has problems with authority but a Puritan's work-ethic. He's a well-traveled, well-read hick. And he's extremely loyal but can't grasp the concept, *patriotism*. Alas, he's

a hot-tempered pacifist and a cloistered utilitarian. He's often observed in the company of anarchists, contrarians, the shunned, the shy, the maladjusted, and the eccentric.

He is not to be trusted unless he's your friend. He's jaded and guileless, optimistic, morose, habitual, and unpredictable. He is by turns too loud and too quiet. Our operatives, who do a lot of listening and watching, report he does a lot of listening and watching. These latter are his most worrisome traits, but our operatives have determined he's no threat to the State.



# Employee

No matter how long, how well,  
you work for us, you're only  
as good as your health is today.

We're not sorry to say  
that to us what we pay  
you is overhead.

Yes, your record is good,  
but alas, it describes a past  
from which we've made a

profit already. We're a  
forward-looking company,  
as we mention in our

annual report. Yes,  
experience counts,  
but our calculations

show inexperience to be  
cheaper. Thanks. We hope  
you've set a little something

aside. Our size is downed.  
Your time is up. We wish you  
luck (one more lie for old time's sake).



# Lyric Craving

Sometimes I crave a lyric poem  
That springs like a clear creek,  
A regulated rush of words  
To wash a weary week.

A yellow butterfly in air,  
A jet-trail frozen high:  
Such images are welcome, too.  
They fill the lyric eye.

In Housman and in Dickinson;  
In Langston; Auden, too.  
There's often something sharp and quick.  
The words are right and few.

I'll go read these, and others, too:  
The Spare Ones, let us say.  
I'll sip the water from the creek  
And slake the thirst today.



# Venues

My residences are three—  
the present, past, and me.  
The past is vast, illusory.  
Present's cramped, a tiny pill,  
so its contents spill  
into the past. Still  
there's Me, which is a what  
that's a where and a who,  
and not so different from a You.





# Rhododendrons Without A Country

Rhododendrons in Canada and the U.S. may be aware of a lot, but they don't know they're Canadian or American. They're even undecided about whether to be trees or shrubs. Unsurprisingly, then, they bloom cautiously. Vivid swatches of color peek through grenade-size buds and give Spring a good hard look to see if it's serious or a double-agent working for Winter.

Rhododendrons never carry a passport or negotiate treaties. They're model citizens of forests, parks, and gardens. Their leaves are leathery, seem wise. Rhododendrons conduct business with sun, soil, and rain. They exhibit a cosmopolitan poise that rises above petty nationalism.



# For Cafeteria Workers

The task of cafeterias is to feed many people quickly. Cafeterias aren't so different, then, from farms and ranches, except the clientele is often less polite than cattle, horses, and pigs.

Back there in the kitchen, they get it done, the workers: Soup for thousands, noodles for hundreds, protein and starch--all timed to be there when a herd arrives with bad moods and lots of opinions.

The dishroom's a symphony of clash, a humidity of food-smell, steam, and sweat, a silver cacaphony. The conveyor-belt's the boss. Each tray might serve catastrophe.

The automatic dishwasher--a tunnel of water and soap--disgorges disinfected implements eaters will soon stuff in their mouths again. The pot-washer is a lonely figure. Once I was he. Heaps of stainless steel arise, food welded to metal, grease smeared on every plane. Alone, you work your way through the mountain 'til nothing's left but you, your soaked shirt, and clocking-out. Out front, the servers smile.

They remember names and endure whiners and would-be gourmands. Runners fill machines that distribute fizz and syrup. Cashiers stand on weary feet and process armies packing trays, hunger, haste, and attitude. Bless the cafeteria workers, who are better than we deserve.

# Watching Bach Played

I saw a string-ensemble play  
Bach's music. Each musician  
leaned, turned, and swayed  
in chairs differently as  
they played. The women's  
backs looked strong in gowns.  
The men's feet in black shoes  
stayed fixed to shiny floor.

Sometimes violin-bows poked  
straight up as if probing unseen  
clouds just above the players'  
heads. Portly cellos had to be  
held up like friendly drunks.  
They mumbled low genial  
gratitude. One man stood

above the players, waving  
his arms and a stick as if  
to try to get someone's  
attention. The violinists  
may have glanced at him,  
I don't know, but mostly  
they cuddled their polished  
wooden instruments, and  
let their bodies feel the music.



# The Ambitionator

Climb into the Ambitionator. Hear it power up. Strap yourself in. Adjust the goggles. On the screen, see your dreams come true. Feel the force of being in charge. Hear the acclaim.

Oops, time to power down. No, I'm afraid it's just a ride. Yes, you have to get out. No, you're not anyone special. That's why the ride feels so good. Yes, you'd have to get in line again, buy a ticket. If I were you, I'd find a cafe, sit down, and be obscure and you. The Ambitionator

is just a ride, my friend. You're nobody in a carnival. I'm nobody who works in one. This, my friend, is the strangest ride of all, our lives.



# The Fallibility Sonnet

My fallibility has tripped me up  
Again. I've fallen on the gravelly ground  
Of imperfection. I would like to cut  
This nonsense out, but no; my flaws have found

A way to find me even when I seem  
To have evaded them successfully.  
They just show up and are a well trained team-  
and venerable. Yes, some have been with me

So long, I look at them with a strange mix  
Of loathing, dread, familiarity.  
Of course I have some antidotal tricks  
And textual guides. Spirituality

Assists. Self-admonition, too.  
Regret. I sigh. But still: what's one to do?



# Notes in Five Paragraphs on How to Write an Essay

According to my notes, an essay should have a niece's statement, which is different from a tropical sentence. An essay should have a beginning (how could it not?), a middle (seems easy enough), and an end (unlike time, which is infinite).

An essay needs evidence. Otherwise, the perp walks. The essay's exertions, if my notes are right, need supporting retail. Paragraphs require transmissions, and the paragraph-brakes need to work.

An essay should have an interesting title, such as "The Duke of Windsor" or "Vampire Vixen." The essay should not include any logical phalluses. It should have a good sense of its audience, even though no one will ever actually pay to see the essay perform in public. Oh—and it should be

grammatically erect, I am told, and it should impose a sin-tax on its sentences. There shouldn't be any coma-splices or spit-infinitives. Obviously, nobody wants an essay to induce a coma or project saliva.

An essay must sight its sources on a “Works Sighted” page. The essay should be engaged to its reader, but that sounds kind of creepy to me. In conclusion, these are my notes on how to write an essay.



# They Say About A Poem

Technically a poem ought to have words  
in it although a blank page beneath a  
title's mighty inviting, a bit like a  
snowy meadow after a day filled with  
looking at city crowds. They say  
about a poem that a poem should show,  
not tell, and be, not mean, but others  
think a poem should tow, not sell,  
and, really, how can a poem that *is*  
not *be*, and why can't it mean while  
it's being? From poems people crave  
imagery, they say, they say about  
a poem, but actually all  
the imagery's in their heads, put there

by literacy's reflexive response to  
letters applied to a surface such  
as paper or a surface such as plastic  
or indeed an ear's membrane. Should  
a poem have conflict? Opinions about  
that bicker. I know a poem that featured  
many quiet rooms where you could go to get  
away from all that conflict in plays,  
life, novels, factories, politics,  
and movies--where you might listen

to a clock chime and watch the weird  
butler straighten ancient paintings  
on the walls of your personality, but  
I guess that, too, is a conflict.





# Walk in the Sunshine

How should I walk in the sunshine?

--Winter's been so long, the sun  
so seemingly distracted.

My shadow will come back  
and stick to my feet. Also,  
I'll need to get used to moving  
and being glad at the same time.

"It will come back to you," people  
say. They say, "You'll remember how  
to walk in the sunshine." They don't  
know this. Nothing comes back. We  
make up memories, ask questions,  
and behave as if we're points of reference.  
And did I tell you about the avalanche?

That's re-routed everything around here.  
Anyway, the upcoming interval doesn't  
know some people call it Spring and everybody  
calls it something or other. Time reflects  
not on its own situation. Time is completely

unselfconscious, unaware that it seems  
to stalk us constantly. Time's always constant,  
in spite of Relativity. No questions occur to  
time. Nothing. It knows how to walk  
in the light of every star.



# Crossing the Creek

They wait for me across the creek.  
They look like shadows from this side.  
One day I'll wade across to seek  
The insubstantial. Petrified

With cold and fear, I'll stand, midstream,  
And feel what's real: round, slippery stones,  
The force of water in a seam  
Of that ravine. My skin and bones

Will read the creek a final time,  
Will feel its push and temperature.  
I'll stand unsteadily, a mime  
Without an audience and most unsure

About the balance of the act.  
But then I'll move, make it across.  
The creek will be the final fact--  
Its gravel, boulders, trout, and moss.

The far side shall be near. I'll fall  
Into the life of death. Will they assist,  
Who've gone before, and bear the pall  
When I fade into a mottled mist?



# In One Quiet Room

In one quiet room, your life occurs,  
not in avenues, halls, or fields. You're  
born in one quiet room. In another,  
you love. In another, grieve. In one

quiet room, you'll face a final suffering  
and die. Yet you may dream of conquering,  
of wielding power vastly beyond just  
one quiet room. You may become

enthralled with self, indulge in self-  
coronation, delude yourself into seeing  
a castle and a realm in one quiet room.  
Pretend, pretend. Life will rein you in,

return you to modest proportions,  
four measured walls, a bed, a light,  
a table. If you are blessed, there will  
be some who love you at the end.

They'll tend to you in one quiet room  
where your small life will end with  
struggling breath and final yearnings,  
morphine, and transport of soul.

In quiet rooms that may seem full  
of noise and business, our life occurs.  
Consider that tonight as you consider  
friends who come and go in one quiet room.



# Evening Hatch

An evening hatch of gnats rose from the river  
in a cloud. One gnat flew to a blue bluff,  
landed there, pushed against infinite,  
immovable stone mass. The gnat

fell away and down toward a pool,  
out of which erupted a rainbow trout,  
which snatched and swallowed the gnat.

I will have had less effect on things than  
this gnat. It's good to meditate on that.



# Still Surprised

I'm still surprised crickets can make that noise. With their legs. Still surprised by literature, by love, by eyes. Still surprised when societies function. Astonished still by cruelty. Mystified yet by existence's existence. Always shocked by violence. I'm still surprised

by the pull of words. Still puzzled that a part of me imagines it can bring back those who died: magical thinking. Still flummoxed by what, exactly, the roles of child and parent require. Remain

wounded, permanently altered, by the murders of JFK, Malcolm X, MLK, RFK, Allende, Palme, Till, Biko, and all the so-called nameless ones. Still stunned by numbers attached to people killed. One. Ten. One hundred thousand. Forty-five thousand. Six million. Twenty-five million. I'm still here, so it seems, surprisingly. I'm still surprised I'm surprised by cynicism and lies.



## Intimacy

through gap in drapes she and he  
see light of streetlamps brightened  
by snow. they know the scene without  
seeing it – pretty – if you're not in  
the scene and still trying to get  
somewhere if not home. they feel  
heat of their bodies commingle naked  
partly under covers. he inhales smell  
of her hair as if it were a rare perfume.  
it is. she savors her alertness to the feel  
of his arms easily on/around her body,  
a gentle, safe weight. this, this time  
they occupy, is a now and a before.  
this is intimacy, where ecstasy incubates.  
she and he, breathing noisefully, wordless,  
know one will say something soon. neither  
knows which one or which words. maybe  
a movement, slight, will decide. languid  
anticipation of what will be thrilling  
thrills even as neither yet stirs, the light  
made brighter by snow filling the brief  
gap between drapes.



# The Extravagance and Reticence of Love

The extravagance of love desires to discover continents and patrol seas. The reticence of love desires one kiss, one sniff of the beloved's magical breath, sweet and metallic.

The extravagance of love manufactures metaphors the way nations churn out weapons. The reticence of love searches for the one thing to say that will make the beloved laugh, an authentic giggle from the belly, the tender abdomen, a holy place. The extravagance of love

makes vast promises, plans trips to Argentina, and compares the beloved to condors and catastrophes. The reticence of love takes off its clothes and sits in the dark until the beloved says something to advance the quest. The extravagance

of love yearns to be as simple as reticent touch, and the reticence of love wants to be a colonel who owns acres of poppies and pastures of horses. Reticence

and extravagance meet as bodies meet. They disappear into a particular moment, and all is frenzy, and all is peace, and all is well.



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## About the Author

Hans Ostrom grew up in Sierra City, a small town in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California. He graduated from Roseville High School and attended Sierra College. He earned a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English at the University of California, Davis. Since 1983, he has taught rhetoric, creative writing, and literature at the University of Puget Sound, a small college in Tacoma, Washington. As a Fulbright Senior Lecturer, he taught at Uppsala University in Sweden. He also taught at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. He is married to Jacqueline Bacon Ostrom. Spencer Ostrom is their son.

Hans Ostrom's previous books of poetry are *Subjects Apprehended* and *The Coast Starlight: Collected Poems 1976-2006*. With Wendy Bishop, he also published the chapbook, *Water's Night*.

He has also published three novels: *Three to Get Ready*, *Honoring Juanita*, and *Without One*.

Since the late 1970s, Ostrom's poetry and short fiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, including *Blue Collar Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Commonweal*, *Cutbank*, *In Tahoma's Shadow*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Kiss Off: Poems to Set You Free*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Motel*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Poetry Nottingham*, *South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Quarterly*, *The Washington Post*, and *Xavier Review*.

(continued)

He has published essays and book-chapters on teaching writing, and, with Wendy Bishop and Katherine Haake, he wrote *Metro: Journeys in Creative Writing*, a textbook for creative-writing. He also produced *Lives and Moments: An Introduction to Short Fiction*.

Ostrom's criticism and scholarship include two books about the work of Langston Hughes. With J. David Macey, he edited *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Literature* in 5 volumes.

Ostrom is Professor of African American Studies and English at the University of Puget Sound, where he was awarded the President's Award for Outstanding Teaching. He has also worked as a carpenter's assistant, a hod-carrier, a dish-washer, and a journalist. His literary influences are eclectic and include the work of Horace, Wu-Men, Shakespeare, Basho, Charles Baudelaire, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W.H. Auden, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Richard Brautigan, Pablo Neruda, Gwendolyn Brooks, Karl Shapiro, Wendy Bishop, and innumerable other writers, ancient and modern, from Canada, China, Germany, India, Italy, Jamaica, South Africa, Sweden, Turkey, and elsewhere. Students in his classes and writers from communities in which he's lived and worked have affected him immeasurably as well.